

Duluth divers put wrecked ships back together

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Lake Superior provides the simple answer to why scuba diving is popular in the Northland — shipwrecks. These sunken hunks attract local divers for three reasons. First, they're everywhere: Duluth's shipping channel is home to at least three and dozens more pepper the shore. Second, the cold water preserves the old ships. This fact equals a great slice of local history and great dives to boot. Third, Duluth divers work hard to protect these unique pieces of the past.

"Imagine the hulk of a ship on the gloomy lake 100 years ago," said local diver Yan Saillard. "To experience that very same scene underwater, it's like magic; it's like time travel."

That same enthusiasm for the past, plus a driving sense of contemporary adventure has divers like Saillard clamoring to protect Lake Superior's wrecks. Saillard, along with many divers from across Minnesota and Wisconsin are putting wrecks back together — well, sort of.

These diving do-gooders are members of the Great Lakes Society for the Conservation of Shipwrecks (GLSPS). The dedicated men and women of this club have one goal: conserve Lake Superior shipwrecks. This means lots of time spent scuba diving. More often than not, the group dives down to repair damaged shipwrecks. Member Ken Knutson said the scuba conservationists of the GLSPS have logged hundreds of these repair dives since the 1970s. The more dynamic of these missions are still taking place. "We work on the Samuel P. Ely [shipwreck] almost every year," said Knutson.

For those unaware, the wreck commonly known as just the "Ely," lies adjacent to the Two Harbors breakwall. According to Knutson, divers originally strengthened the crumbling wreck, bolstering it with massive steel bolts they attached with underwater air drills. What's more is that the original work on the Ely was done in the winter, under a thick sheet of ice. Numerous repairs have been done to the Ely since, as well as a number of underwater projects on other local ships.

Piecing together the past isn't the only important job the GLSPS does, though. According to member Jay Hansen, keeping its legacy intact is the group's top priority. "A lot of people don't know what we have here, and just because you can't see it, doesn't mean it's not there," he said.

Hansen cited the importance of education to the GLSPS mission. He speaks from a deeply personal experience. Last July, the GLSPS launched a technical dive expedition from Hansen's boat, turning up the missing ship Benjamin Noble. Descending to 360 feet, GLSPS divers found the mangled wreck partially buried in a moonscape of mud. Previously, the "Noble" had been chalked up as a mysterious loss since it disappeared in 1914.

After the group positively identified the wreck, the sunken ship was added to the National Historic Register and legally protected from thieves, or "wreck reapers" as they're infamously known. These underwater looters have been known to deal in black market exchanges for priceless artifacts stolen from deep beneath Lake Superior.

"If we keep pulling things off the wrecks, they won't be around for my kids to see," Hansen said.

That type of protective mindset has spurred the GLSPS toward its newest project, the "put it back" program. Known simply as the PIB, this program allows anyone who illegally owns a piece of shipwreck history to give it back, with no consequences. Priceless pieces go to museums. Otherwise, dedicated GLSPS divers put the objects back into the water for others to see. Thus, the historical integrity of each shipwreck is strengthened along with a sense of community trust. "We are not in the business of collecting artifacts, but we will help position them in the right museums or back where they belong," said GLSPS president Steve Daniels.

The GLSPS is truly dedicated to all aspects of shipwreck involvement. The group's divers work with archaeologists to mark and map every wreck site they find. They install mooring buoys and monitor zebra mussel infestations.

The group also works cooperatively with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the U.S.

Coast Guard and the Army Corps of Engineers. Recently, the group proposed the purchase and artificial sinking of a number of large ships for both education and fun. GLSPS members have also begun a video project outlining safe and respectful SCUBA diving practices on shipwrecks. For the GLSPS, safe, fun diving is what it's all about. Duluth member Corey Daniels said friendly divers are the best part of belonging to the GLSPS. "I guess we're always just looking for more scuba divers," Daniels said. "There are a lot of good ones in town, but some are scared off by Lake Superior's cold water."

That's why the organization's Duluth chapter has come together to schedule monthly "fun" dives throughout the summer. Daniels said these group dives are a great way to meet local shipwreck enthusiasts and experience a taste of underwater exploration. The group's next "fun" dive is scheduled for Saturday, July 8 on the Madeira wreck near Split Rock Light House.

The group also meets every second Wednesday of the month and can be contacted through member Randy Bebee at 525-0571. Interested visitors can also find info online at www.glsps.org.